THE MERSHON CENTER at The Ohio State University

Robert McMahon

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Ralph D. Mershon Distinguished Professor

"U.S. National Security Policy Under Eisenhower and Kennedy"

Thursday, May 4, 2006
12:00 p.m.
Mershon Center
Room 120

This lecture is open to the public. Lunch will be served to invited students and faculty who RSVP to Ann Powers no later than Tuesday, May 2, 2006.

Robert J. McMahon joined the History Department in Fall 2005. He previously taught at the University of Florida (1982-2005) and has held visiting positions at the University of Virginia and University College Dublin. A specialist in the history of U.S. foreign relations, Professor McMahon has a joint appointment with the Mershon Center.

He is the author of several books, including *Colonialism and Cold War: The United States and the Struggle for Indonesian Independence, 1945-49* (1981); *The Cold War on the Periphery: the United States, India, and Pakistan* (1994); and *The Limits of Empire: The United States and Southeast Asia since World War II* (1999). In 2000, McMahon served as president of the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations.

Presidents Dwight D. Eisenhower and John F. Kennedy had the same assessment of the Soviet Union during the Cold War rivalry that dominated world politics in the latter half of the 20 th century: that its implacable hostility, mounting military strength, and positive ideological appeal posed a fundamental threat to the security of the United States. Both accepted the basic goals of the Truman administration's containment strategy. However, the two presidents differed in their assessments of the extent of the Soviet threat, and in their judgments about how best to counter it. This led to quite different approaches to U.S. national security during the Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations.

To Eisenhower, national security encompassed more than just the physical defense of the homeland. It also meant protecting the country's way of life, basic values, economic system, and domestic institutions. Increasing military expenditures without bounds so as to counter the Soviet challenge posed two dangers. First, Eisenhower was concerned about bankrupting the U.S. economy. He believed that the United States must not overtax its resources in the effort to maintain military superiority; in fact, he felt that wrecking the U.S. economy would be a major victory for the Soviets. Second, Eisenhower thought that increased security spending and overgrowth of military institutions could turn the United States into a “garrison state,” curtailing democracy and freedom.

In his quest to achieve security, keep the United States solvent, and guard its values and personal freedoms from encroachments of an overarching state, Eisenhower resolved to limit the growth of military expenditures. He agreed that the Soviet threat in Europe was real and that Soviet expansion must be deterred, but he disagreed with Truman that a further U.S. military build-up was needed to counter the projected threat of Soviet nuclear capability. Instead, Eisenhower correctly considered the U.S.-Soviet competition as a long-term proposition. He reasoned that Soviet leaders would not act irrationally and seek a military conflict with the United States because that would bring ruin to their own country. Therefore, greater efficiency in defense

spending could and must be achieved.

The direct outcome of Eisenhower's policy was budget cuts to numerous military programs. His objective was to establish a level of defense spending that was sustainable in the long run and would not threaten fiscal solvency or turn the United States into a garrison state. To achieve this goal, Eisenhower increasingly relied on nuclear weapons to deter Soviet (and Chinese) aggression. His main guiding principle was that a conflict, no matter how grave, should not lead a people to do away with what they are trying to protect in the first place. This principle has enormous resonance after Sept. 11.

In contrast to the Truman administration, Eisenhower also attached greater importance to U.S. allies. His reasoning was that as the European countries grew stronger and became more capable of defending themselves from the Soviets, the United States would be in a position to limit its defense expenditures and lower troop levels overseas. Eisenhower also accorded greater weight to the role of psychological warfare, public diplomacy, and propaganda in the broader Cold War strategy. He was convinced that this war could not be won by military means alone, but that such a fundamentally ideological competition required courting world opinion and highlighting the strengths and appeal of the American system over the Soviet one.

Kennedy's national security strategy differed from Eisenhower's in a number of ways. First, Kennedy believed that it was crucial to bolster U.S. defenses and rebuild military superiority over the Soviets, which he alleged had been lost during the Eisenhower years. Kennedy felt that more, not less, military spending was needed, because the United States needed to enhance its military capabilities and execute the Cold War more vigorously.

Like Eisenhower, Kennedy dreaded the possibility of mutual destruction that would ensue from any nuclear war with the Soviet Union. Unlike Eisenhower, however, he concluded that the full range of U.S. non-nuclear capabilities should be expanded. This would allow the United States to tailor its responses to each kind and level of threat. In contrast to the all-or-nothing straightjacket imposed by Eisenhower's emphasis on the policy of massive retaliation, Kennedy put forth the flexible response doctrine, by which the United States would be in a position to counter the Soviet threat on multiple levels.

The direct policy outcome of Kennedy's strategy was increased defense spending. This was made possible in part by the then dominant Keynesian economic philosophy, which emphasized the positive role of government intervention in the economy. This stood in sharp contrast to Eisenhower's conservative worldview, which emphasized budget discipline and fiscal solvency. Kennedy believed that the American economy could absorb increased government and defense expenditures without negative consequences.

Kennedy also advocated an activist U.S. policy toward the “Third World.” Convinced that the primary scene of the struggle between the United States and Soviet Union had shifted to newly independent countries, Kennedy made the battle for the developing world a priority in the Cold War strategy. This meant that the United States would try to gain allies among such countries, hence adopting a more tolerant and friendly attitude to these newly independent states. America would also fight wars by proxy, if necessary.

The distinctive features of Kennedy's national security strategy emanated mostly from a heightened threat perception. This in part had to do with the emergence of China as an increasingly menacing communist adversary. But it also resulted from the administration's evaluation that the United States had fallen behind the Soviets, in terms of both military capability and the struggle for the hearts and minds of the Third World.

Kennedy concluded that the United States not only needed to spend more on defense, but also that it had to be more attuned to the socio-economic conditions in developing countries. As such ills seemed to fuel the communist appeal, he believed that the administration should use economic and social programs to spur modernization, alleviate poverty, and address educational and health needs in the Third World. The result was a number of high-profile international programs and incentives such as the Peace Corps.

How best to respond to the fundamental threat posed by an ideological and military rival was the overriding concern of the two U.S. presidents. Eisenhower and Kennedy differed in their assessment of the resources available for fighting the Cold War, the importance of different parts of the world, and the right mix of military and other types of state spending. Working within a broad consensus on U.S. strategic goals during perhaps the most dangerous phase of the Cold War, the two administrations differed in tactical priorities. However, both saw the conflict as a long-term struggle that entailed not only military, but also political, economic and ideological competition. Each president developed his own response for the main objective of winning the Cold War.